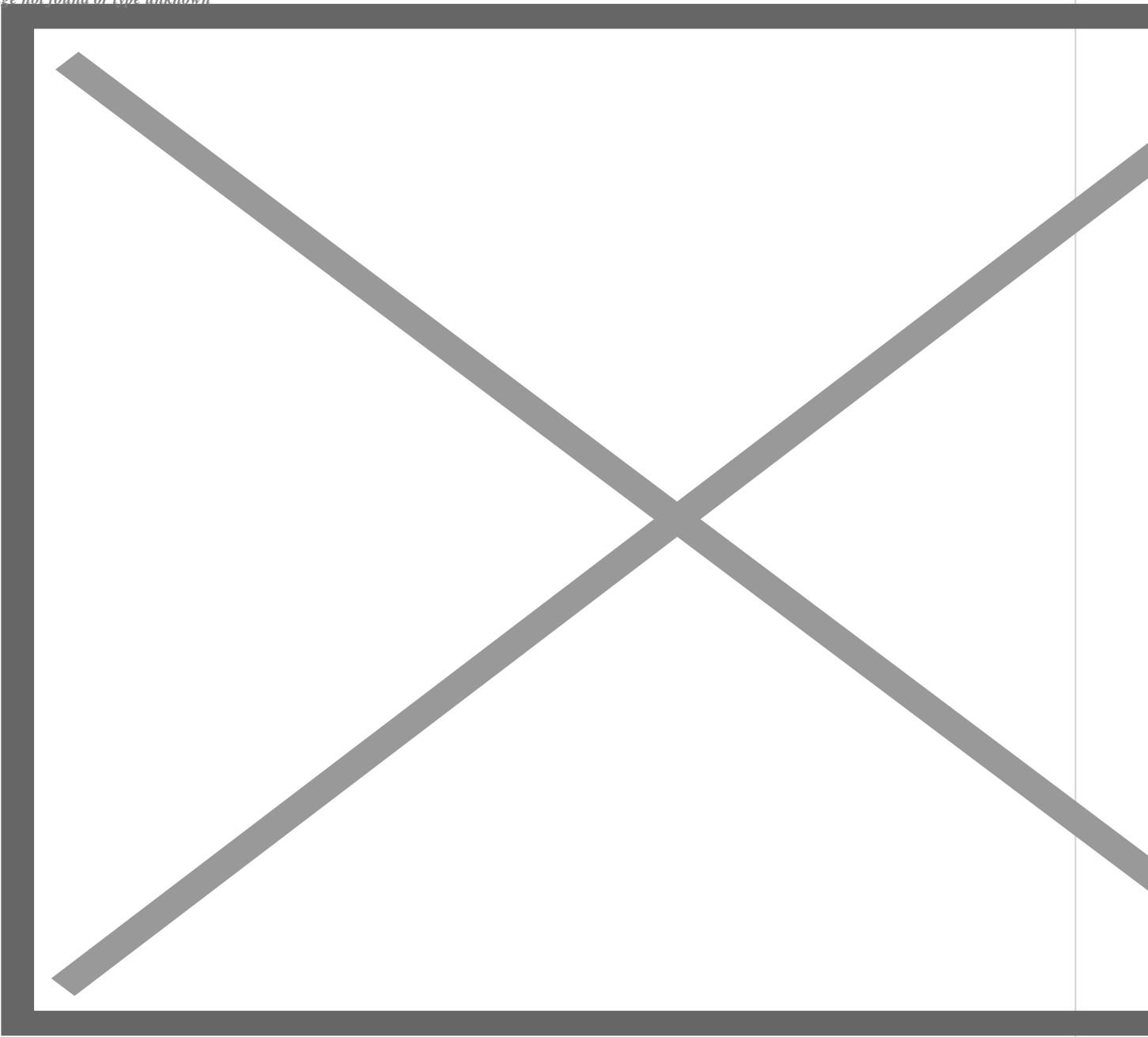


Protests break out against French vote in favor of ban on hijab

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France's 5.7 million-strong minority Muslim population is the largest in Europe. [Photo: Thibault Camus/AP]

Paris, April 12 (RHC)-- A bid by the French Senate to ban girls under 18 from wearing the hijab in public has drawn condemnation, with the hashtag #HandsOffMyHijab circulating widely on social media.

The hijab is a headscarf worn by many Muslim women and has been the subject of a decades-long feud in France.

The French Senate's move comes as part of Paris's push to introduce a so-called "anti-separatism" bill which it says aims to bolster the country's secular system, but critics have denounced, arguing it singles out the minority Muslim population.

While debating the proposed legislation on March 30, senators approved an amendment to the bill calling for the "prohibition in the public space of any conspicuous religious sign by minors and of any dress or clothing which would signify inferiority of women over men." The ban is not yet law, with France's National Assembly required to sign off on the change before it can take effect.

But a backlash to the amendment was swift, with some suggesting the proposed rule amounted to a "law against Islam." "Age to consent to sex in France: 15 Age to consent to hijab: 18 Let that sink in. It isn't a law against the hijab. It's a law against Islam. #Handsoffmyhijab #FranceHijabBan," one Twitter user wrote.

Another posted: "I thought we already had this covered. Forcing a woman to wear a hijab is wrong. Just like forcing her to take it off is wrong. It's HER choice."

The issue also attracted the attention of several high-profile figures. On Instagram, Olympic athlete Ibtihaj Muhammad shared a post suggesting the Senate's amendment indicated "Islamophobia is deepening in France." "This is what happens when you normalize anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim hate speech, bias, discrimination, and hate crimes – Islamophobia written into law," the post said.

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